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Calvinistic and Reformed: What's the Difference?



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Misunderstanding terms may be terminal. Shakespeare had Juliet say, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet” (“Romeo and Juliet,” Act 2 Scene 2). True, but if you asked for a skunk when you wanted a rose, you would not like the smell.

Our cultural moment has sometimes shown disdain for “labels,” especially in a religious context. “Non-denominational” has, ironically, become a popular denomination. Instead of discarding labels, we should use them charitably and accurately.

Thankfully, the last several decades have enjoyed a revived interest among American Christians in serious, historic

theology. Insofar as that theology is true and scriptural, we should rejoice. However, sometimes open-minded enthusiasts embrace identifying terms for themselves before they understand very well what they mean. Consequently, confusion arises, those terms may become distorted, or people so identified eventually grow into them, so that the labeling becomes more apt.

This has lately been the case for the terms “Calvinistic” and “Reformed.” Many may think they mean about the same thing, but they really have different senses and connotations.

The term “Calvinists” has been employed disparagingly by Roman Catholics, as if it denoted an aberrant sect of Christendom more devoted to following one man, John Calvin, than remaining part of the true, universal or catholic church. While that was not Calvin’s own view or intention, it might be a fair criticism of some of his later admirers.

The term “Calvinist,” in general, is probably most widely used and understood for Christians with a high view of the sovereignty of God, especially with respect to the topic of “soteriology” (the doctrine of salvation). Long after Calvin left his mark, the Dutch Reformed churches formally refuted a challenge to their theology known as the Remonstrance, of which Jacobus Arminius was a champion, from whom Arminianism takes its name. The Arminian challengers stated

their beliefs, in opposition to the Dutch Calvinists, under five points. From this arose the masterful rebuttal of the Canons of Dort. Its substance is now known popularly as the Five Points of Calvinism. Those points may be remembered by the acronym TULIP—fittingly, the national flower of the Netherlands.

T otal Depravity (our need of grace)
U nconditional Election (the election of grace)
L imited Atonement (the price of grace)
I rresistible Grace (the attraction of grace)
P erseverance of the Saints (the triumph of grace)*

These five points are not all that Calvin or consistent Calvinists teach about salvation, much less about many other topics in theology. However, they are likely what most people have in mind by the term Calvinism. They cannot really be understood properly apart from the related subjects of predestination and divine providence. Calvin's writings contain much excellent material for our edification in all these matters.

The term “Reformed,” in general, has far more extensive connotations. It spans more centuries than Calvin's time, encompasses a host of great theologians besides Calvin, and brings to mind many more topics of Christian theology and

practice. Calvinism may be considered a subset of the Reformed tradition.

The Reformed tradition is the product of the Protestant Reformation in general. Sometimes the Reformed tradition is contrasted with traditional Lutheran theology, though they have much in common. Conspicuous areas of difference are details concerning our understanding of the Lord's Supper and the proper outward form of Christian worship.

Certain ideas are generally associated with Reformed theology, ideas not necessarily brought to mind by the term Calvinism. We can suggest five as examples, though the list is surely longer and debatable.

- Covenant theology
- Confessional and catholic (traditional, orthodox) theology
- The Regulative Principle of Worship
- The means of grace (the Word, two sacraments, and prayer)
- The five solas of the Reformation (sola scriptura, solus Christus, sola fide, sola gratia, soli Deo gloria)

Many believe that Reformed covenant theology necessitates infant baptism, as in the Westminster standards, but 17th-century Particular Baptists held a form of covenant theology more consistent with “credobaptism,” the baptism of

believers only, and not their physical children. This particular form of covenant theology with credobaptism is represented, for example, by the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith—also known as the 1689—and the Baptist Catechism of 1693.

From all these considerations, we may observe that the terms Calvinistic and Reformed really should not be used interchangeably. Many churches today are, perhaps, Calvinistic, but not Reformed. Many using these labels for themselves unintentionally oppose things that those very labels entail.

If you know these things and have some acquaintance with all the terms found in this description, you will have a good grasp of the shared and distinctive ideas often associated with the terms Calvinistic and Reformed. Ω

* These phrases, restating the Five Points in terms of God's grace, are from the booklet "God's Astounding Grace" by D. Scott Meadows.

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